

## MORAL SCEPTICISM AND MORAL KNOWLEDGE

As Renford Bambrough indicates with the title of his book, *Moral Scepticism and Moral Knowledge* (Atlantic Highlands, N. J.: Humanities Press, 1979), the issues addressed here concern moral epistemology, and the central question of the book is the place of reason in ethical judgments. Bambrough's principal object of criticism is the skeptic or relativist who doubts or denies the objectivity of moral judgments. Thus, his purpose is to "show that 'the ordinary moral consciousness' is right in regarding itself as a *consciousness*, as an awareness of things that are not dependent for their existence or properties upon the fact of being apprehended." To this end, Bambrough directs his energies essentially to the task of correcting the misconceptions of the nature and role of reason in moral inquiry and judgment.

The phrase "ordinary moral consciousness," however, has special significance in the early part of the book before Bambrough discusses the question of reason directly. In the second chapter he claims that an argument analogous to G.E. Moore's proof of the external world can be constructed with respect to certain moral propositions—in other words, that there is something self-contradictory about accepting Moore's proof and not accepting the objectivity of certain moral propositions.

The argument Bambrough offers is intriguing and proceeds as follows: consider this proposition: "We know that this child, who is about to undergo what would otherwise be painful surgery, should be given an anaesthetic before the operation." Bambrough claims that no proposition that could be put forth to doubt this proposition could be more certainly true than the proposition itself. Thus, one can claim to know in advance that any argument that asserts that one cannot know the proposition in question either has a false premise or has a mistake in reasoning. Thus, this proposition has the same epistemological status as many of Moore's propositions, such as, "People have existed in the past."

Despite the initial appeal of the argument, however, it remains unconvincing in the last analysis. In the first place, maybe no anesthetic is present, and yet surgery is required to avoid death (e.g., we are in the wilderness). One might respond that the proposition is true *if* supplies are available or that, whether supplies are available or not, the morality of the statement is still somehow meaningful. But the latter view begs the question about whether moral judgments are tied to or independent of available technologies or supplies, and the former alternative indicates that the proposition lacks a consideration that is relevant to its assessment. In either case, the proposition does not command the same sort of immediate assent as, "Here is a hand."

It may furthermore be true that there are two children who need the operation and there is only enough anesthesia for one. Here it would not be obvious that one child deserves the anesthetic more than the other. We could also imagine that the child has an extreme allergic reaction to any anesthetic, such that the reaction would be worse than the surgery. Or, perhaps we are offering this proposition to one who just likes to watch children suffer. I am willing to grant Bambrough that such an insensitive person would not be able to offer an argument for his perversion that would be sufficient to overthrow our concern for the child. Yet, what is interesting is not the inability to make a case for suffering, but rather the fact that this same person would unquestionably assent to Moore's propositions without assenting to Bambrough's.

The general point to be made here is that moral propositions are *not* like Moore's propositions—no matter how apparently obvious they may be. Whatever moral propositions are, they first depend upon the kinds of facts Moore proposes, as well as upon related facts of the same order (e.g., that conscious people feel pain when cut). Moral propositions are not of the same order as Moore's "commonsense" facts, since they presuppose such facts, while the reverse is not the case. I believe we can accept this last point without having to resort to the kind of relativism and skepticism Bambrough successfully attacks elsewhere. But Bambrough is so zealous throughout the book in trying to show that the traditional problems thought peculiar to moral propositions are also problems for factual inquiry that he comes very close to obliterating any means for separating the one from the other—that is, he comes close to leaving us with no criteria for identifying or forming a class of moral propositions.

Nevertheless, the second chapter is not without significant value, for we also find one of the finest (in terms of concise precision of expression) refutations of the most common propositions advanced in favor of moral skepticism or relativism. These skeptical theses and their refutations are too numerous to summarize here. It is sufficient to note that Bambrough's rebuttals are not necessarily dependent upon his proof discussed above, which precedes them.

The central purpose of the third chapter is to refute the claim made by skeptics against moral objectivists that a belief in moral objectivism would entitle one to impose certain moral values on others. In response to this claim, Bambrough first points out that the skeptical objection is self-refuting. To argue that moral objectivism may lead to dogmatism is itself to take a moral stand by asserting the objective impropriety of moral authoritarianism. More important, however, is his argument that the truth or falsity of a moral proposition is in no way connected to the psychological propensity for authoritarianism. The *desire* to impose a value is logically unrelated to its truth value. Finally, Bambrough shows that one's freedom of inquiry is no more constrained by the recognition of a moral truth than is the freedom of scientific inquiry constrained by a scien-

tific truth: the truth being "forced" upon the moral researcher is analogous to the truth "forced" upon the scientific researcher. Here, however, Bambrough is somewhat off the point. The worry is not about whether moral philosophers will be allowed to conduct unhindered inquiries into the nature of morality but about whether the "objective" results of that inquiry will be imposed on others. Bambrough would do well to recognize (in addition to the arguments he does make) an old point often made by political libertarians: it does not follow from the fact that we know what is right that we therefore have the right to impose what we know.

The fourth chapter tries to avoid any misinterpretation that might arise from the previous chapter with respect to feelings. Bambrough's purpose here is to show that feelings are necessarily connected to moral judgments. An analogy is drawn between such propositions as "X is right" and "X is blue" to the effect that in both cases the speaker is in a unique position in the sense that he is giving a first-hand report of his feelings. Such reports are legitimate pieces of evidence for taking the assertion seriously. But Bambrough cautions us to distinguish between kinds of evidence and degrees of evidence. In both of the propositions just mentioned we must respect the first-hand report (the kind of evidence), but we need not conclude that therefore the evidence is sufficiently weighty to be beyond challenge by other kinds of relevant evidence.

Much of Bambrough's project concerns the thesis that logic and fact are an integral part of any moral judgment and cannot be artificially separated from such judgments without destroying the judgment itself. The fifth chapter of the book is a continuation of that project. Bambrough claims that if all matters of fact and logic were settled there might still be a disagreement of feeling, but this would not be a *moral* disagreement. Neither Hume nor any of his disciples has produced an example of a moral dispute in which nothing divides the parties but a matter of feeling. Indeed, Bambrough claims that to produce such an example is not even theoretically possible. Bambrough may be right that no genuine moral dispute is ever just about feelings, but one is led to wonder whether there might be some disputes in which the parties agree on fact and logic but still disagree about what is right. At least as the terms *fact* and *logic* are normally understood, it seems possible that a deontologist and a utilitarian could agree on the facts of a case and what their respective principles imply with respect to evaluating that case and yet still disagree about its moral value. It is not enough to ask that we broaden our meaning of *fact* and *logic* to solve such a case (as Bambrough does). We must recognize that there are some very basic metaphysical differences that separate the parties, especially if Kant is our deontologist. And since how we conceive of "facts" and "logic" is dependent upon our metaphysics, at least to some extent, broadening these terms to cover metaphysical disputes will only render them meaningless. Hume, for example, has a metaphysics which

holds that what is distinguishable is also separable. This leads him to conclude that there must be a single element among many other components to which the term *moral* is applicable. With this view in the background, Hume would simply deny that a dispute about feelings is not about morality (provided it's the right feeling). And because of his doctrine that what is distinguishable is separable, it does not matter if no real example of a dispute about just feelings has been found—one is still theoretically possible.

The question of conflicting moral perspectives is continued in the sixth chapter. Here Bambrough's main purpose is to show how much common ground and shared values exist between any two parties of a moral dispute. Sartre and Hume are attacked for believing that the ultimate foundation of moral judgments (and hence conflict) is an arbitrary assertion of will or feeling. For Bambrough, the nature of moral conflict is a true dialectic that rests, following John Wisdom, upon shared experiences and a shared humanity. And while Bambrough is quite right to argue that a dispute cannot be conducted without enough of a common basis for communication, one is nevertheless left in doubt about whether our "common experiences" are sufficient in themselves to resolve conflict. Perhaps what is needed is some rather uncommon thinking and reflection whereby some experience that is not so readily apparent is shown to be relevant. This last point is just the one John Wisdom makes about the value of metaphysics—its "paradoxes" illuminate the ordinary.

The seventh and eighth chapters are both devoted to a more detailed analysis of the nature of reason in morality. A number of important issues are discussed in the seventh chapter. In the first place, Bambrough shows that logic is itself essentially a normative science: not only is logic guided by standards of validity, but we must also commit ourselves to the *value* of sound reasoning. Once the normative character of logic has been established, Bambrough goes on to argue that there is not as wide a gulf between theoretical and practical reasoning as many philosophers have supposed. That is to say, the norms of logic and argument guiding the one are also applicable to the other. Moreover, we must consider not only the place of reason in ethics but also the place of action and attitude in theoretical reasoning. Bambrough's especially interesting discussion of commitment with respect to both theoretical and practical reasoning leads to an even more rewarding discussion of *akrasia* as it applies to theoretical reason. Theoretical *akrasia* would be the refusal to commit oneself to certain conclusions necessitated by a valid argument. Finally, Bambrough draws some parallels between such questions as, Why should I be moral? and Why should I believe what is true? The skeptical challenge in the first case can be met in ways similar to those used by recent philosophers in the second. In meeting this challenge, however, we must be careful to distinguish the grounds, or reasons, for accepting a position from the accompanying inducements for acceptance. Inducements are especially common in ethical

dialectics, but we should not—as so many contemporary theorists have done—lose sight of the reasons being offered in support of a position just because we are, at the same time, urging others to behave in a certain way.

The eighth chapter is an even deeper look into the nature of reason and its place in ethics. Bambrough attacks the view that the only fundamental way of justifying a conclusion is to derive it from something that is logically prior to it. Peirce, Mill, and Wisdom are cited to the effect that ordinary inferences do not require a universal principle for their validity. Particulars, or cases, are the final arbiter. Bambrough claims that the correct form of reasoning in ethics is also through cases and not a movement from the universal to the particular. For him, the movement is more from particular to particular. Going from the universal to the particular leads to skepticism or dogmatism, for the skeptic says that the starting point begs the question, while the dogmatist resorts to some form of intuitionism to avoid skepticism. The mistake philosophers have made is to think “that the foundations of our knowledge are to be looked for in the sky and not in the soil.”

Yet, despite any claims by Bambrough to the contrary, this approach to ethics could ultimately come to ignore the very real role played by principles in making and forming ethical judgments and evaluations. To move from case to case, as Bambrough suggests, is likely to result in a kind of pragmatic intuitionism devoid of a general theory of basic principles. Bambrough does claim that principles will emerge from particulars, but little is said about what these principles will look like and how they might be of the type that would keep us from lapsing into expediency. It seems to me that the choice is not so much a matter of going from universals to particulars or vice versa, but a process of checking the one against the other. Thus, to continue Bambrough’s metaphor, we know we are on the soil because we can find the sky, and we recognize the sky because we have had some experience with the soil.

Bambrough makes an excellent point later in the chapter when he argues that, just because debate continues about moral matters, that is no reason to conclude that there are no satisfactory answers. The skeptic seems to demand answers *sub specie aeternitatis*, but this is an impossible criterion to fulfill. We need not conclude that there is no truth just because we cannot examine every case. “You might as well say that I cannot know where the Eiffel Tower is because there are spatial relations between it and other objects in space that I have never considered and shall never consider and have no intention of considering.” In this respect, moral knowledge does not differ from any other branch of inquiry.

By the time one gets to the last chapter, one suspects that Bambrough is drawing heavily from an older tradition. This suspicion is confirmed with the following admission, which also sums up the nature of the chapter: “It will be clear how close is the kinship between the argument of this book and the central conceptions of Aristotle’s moral philosophy. The connections are close enough to permit a general account of Aristotle’s *phronesis* to

serve also as a statement of the main conclusions of this work." The connections Bambrough draws between his own views and those of Aristotle are instructive and help illuminate much of what was said earlier. But he does not draw out the connections Aristotle himself saw between his moral epistemology and his (Aristotle's) more general metaphysical and epistemological theses. Some of the problems I raised earlier could be solved or clarified if Bambrough had been willing to make this move. It is unfair to demand of an author that he cover every related topic in a book, but there is no indication that Bambrough would draw the aforementioned connection if he could. And it is my view that a full appreciation of Aristotle's moral philosophy cannot be forthcoming until one is willing to see Aristotle's ethics in light of his larger system.

Nevertheless, Bambrough, as Moore, Wittgenstein, and Wisdom have done in other areas, offers us a foothold for beginning to take seriously some classical alternatives to the kind of moral skepticism popular since Hume. Moreover, there is much in this book that is helpful but that I did not cover in my comments here. Thus, the work is recommended with the qualification that its fundamental coherency is provided by the Aristotelian tradition that stands behind it.

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